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ABSTRACT

The study examined teacher and peer assessment of 34 mainstreamed educable mentally retarded (EMR) children in grades 3 through 6 in nine public schools in central Illinois. A comparison sample of 34 nonretarded Ss was matched to the EMR Ss on sex, race, and grade level. Children in each S's regular classroom were asked to rate on a five-point scale how much they enjoyed playing with each of their classmates. A sociometric nomination measure assessed children's best friendship choices, while another technique provided peer assessments of children's social behavior. Teachers rated four dimensions of Ss' social behavior with peers: friendly/cooperative, avoidant/withdrawn, bossy/domineering, and aggressive/disruptive. Ss goal orientations in game situations were assessed along with their feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction. A series of multivariate and univariate analyses of variance revealed that retarded Ss were significantly lower in sociometric status than nonretarded Ss. Compared to nonretarded Ss, retarded children were perceived as less cooperative, more shy, and were less likely to be named as leaders. Findings confirmed the hypothesis that EMR children are shy and withdrawn rather than aggressive-disruptive. Teacher assessments were consistent with the peer assessment data. Group differences were found in all three goal subscales in measures of goal orientation: Ss appeared to focus on performance aspects of games and potential failure/rejection rather than on the opportunities for social interaction. Finally, as hypothesized, EMR Ss reported feeling more lonely and dissatisfied with their social relationships in school than did the nonretarded Ss. Findings suggested the need to couple environmental manipulations with direct social skills training for the retarded child. (CL)

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# Loneliness, Goal Orientation, and Sociometric Status: Mildly Retarded Children's Adaptation to the Mainstream Classroom

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Loneliness, Goal Orientation, and Sociometric Status: Mildly Retarded Children's Adaptation to the Mainstream Classroom

Previous research on the social outcomes of mainstreaming mildly retarded children has typically involved the use of sociometric measures to index the retarded child's social adjustment in the regular classroom. Research of this kind has consistently shown that mildly retarded children are less socially accepted and more socially rejected than their nonretarded schoolmates (see Gottlieb & Leyser, 1981, and MacMillan & Morrison, 1984 for reviews). Although the lower peer status of mildly retarded school children is well established, the reasons for their low status are not as well understood.

Previous correlational research by Gottlieb, Semmel, and Veldman (1978) indicates that retarded children who are perceived by teachers and peers as misbehaving -- that is, as aggressive or disruptive -- also tend to be socially rejected. By contrast, studies involving direct observations in the regular classroom reveal few, if any, differences in the frequency of misbehavior by retarded and nonretarded children (e.g., Gampel, Gottlieb, & Harrison, 1974; Gampel, Harrison, & Budoff, 1972). Instead, the most distinctive feature of the mainstreamed retarded child's observed behavior appears to be a generally low rate of social interaction with other children (Gampel et al., 1972; Herink, 1980).

One difficulty in interpreting the previous research is the lack of comparability between the two types of studies. For example, the studies involving teacher and peers assessments have not reported comparisons of the behavior of retarded and nonretarded children. Thus, we cannot assume that the retarded children were actually perceived as more aggressive disruptive

than their nonretarded classmates. Also, the studies of perceived behavior have not involved assessments of social withdrawal or prosocial characteristics. A major purpose of the present study was to obtain teacher and peers assessments on a broader range of behavioral characteristics that might account for peer acceptance versus rejection of the mainstreamed retarded child. Our hypothesis was that teachers and peers perceive and describe retarded children not as aggressive-disruptive but rather as more shy-withdrawn and socially unskilled than their nonretarded peers. In addition we were interested in making group comparisons with respect to the behavioral correlates of sociometric status.

Consistent with the idea that retarded children are withdrawn and unskilled, a second hypothesis explored in this study was that mildly retarded children have a more avoidant goal orientation than nonretarded children. This hypothesis is consistent with previous research on the motivational characteristics of retarded children (see Balla & Zigler, 1979, and Siegel, 1979 for reviews). In exploring this hypothesis, we focused specifically on retarded children's goals with respect to the game-playing context. This context was of particular interest, since much of the contact between retarded and nonretarded children is for nonacademic activities such as recess or physical education. Further, these settings place retarded children at risk for peer rejection due to the retarded child's lack of game-playing competence.

In previous research with nonretarded children, Taylor and Asher (1985) used a self-report measure to assess three dimensions of children's goals and concerns in game-playing situations: relationship orientation (focusing on getting along with other players and making friends), performance

orientation (focusing on doing well and demonstrating competence in the game) and avoidance (concerns about game failure and social rejection). Results of the study showed that low-status children assigned less importance to relationship goals and expressed more concerns about avoiding negative experiences in the game than higher status children. In the present research, we expected that retarded children would be more avoidant than nonretarded children in their orientation toward game situations and would also place less importance on the interpersonal relationship aspects of game playing. We also examined relationships between children's goals and sociometric status.

The final hypothesis explored in this research was that retarded children feel more lonely in school than nonretarded children. The consistent finding that retarded children are socially rejected by their nonretarded classmates leads to the expectation that these children feel rejected or isolated from their peers. However, this issue has never been directly addressed in the literature. Indeed, only recently has loneliness been examined with nonretarded children. In research by Asher, Hymel, and Renshaw (1984) and Asher and Wheeler (1985), loneliness was found to have a significant negative relationship to sociometric status, and rejected children were found to be more lonely than children who were socially accepted in the peer group. In the present study, we expected that retarded children would express more feelings of loneliness and social dissatisfaction than their regular class peers and that loneliness would be negatively related to peer status in both groups. Our hypothesis concerning group differences in loneliness was offered somewhat tentatively, however. It is conceivable that retarded children might be buffered from feelings of

loneliness or rejection by virtue of spending much of their school day among other special education peers. Also, it could be argued that retarded children might not fully recognize or understand the extent of their social rejection. For these reasons, it was especially important to supplement the sociometric data with information about children's own sense of well-being.

Subjects for the study were 34 mainstreamed educable mentally retarded children (EMR) drawn from 21 third- through sixth-grade classrooms in nine public schools in central Illinois. The retarded children's IQ scores ranged from 47-80, with an average IQ of 63. All children had been identified by the school system as eligible for special education services due to intellectual and academic deficits. The racial composition of the sample was 91% white and 9% black.

A comparison sample of 34 nonretarded children was selected from the same regular clssrooms as the retarded children. We gave particular attention to the selection of this sample, since a consistent problem in previous mainstreaming research has been inadequate attention to selection of the nonretarded comparison samples (MacMillan, Meyers, & Morrison, 1980). Low-income and minority children are often over-represented among special education students, but not among the regular education comparison students. Since sociometric status is affected by income and race as well as IQ, serious confounding can result.

In this study, the nonretarded children were matched to the EMR children on sex, race, and grade level. Approximate matching for socioeconomic status was achieved for 29 of the 34 pairs of students on the basis of parent occupation or neighborhood of residence. The parent occupation data

were coded, using the 1970 census classifications and then assigned a score based on the Duncan Socioeconomic Index. Based on these scores, the mean SES level for the EMR group was found to be slightly lower, but not significantly different, than that of the nonEMR group.

We administered two measures of sociometric status in the study. As a measure of peer acceptance, the children in each subject's regular classroom were asked to rate on a five-point scale how much they liked to play with each of their classmates. A child's score on the rating-scale measure was the average rating received from all classmates. To facilitate comparisons across classrooms, this score was converted to a Z score based on the mean and standard deviation within each class.

A sociometric nomination measure was used to assess children's best friendship choices. Children indicated their best friends by circling their names on a class roster. A common procedure in administering sociometric nomination measures is to limit children to three choices. However, we permitted children to nominate as many classmates as they wanted in order to maximize the possibility that EMR students would be selected. Each child's score was the total number of nominations received divided by the number of classmates doing the nominating. This score was converted to a Z score within classroom.

Peer assessments of the children's social behavior were obtained using a procedure developed by Coie, Dodge, and Coppotelli (1982). Here, children nominated classmates who best fit five behavioral criteria: "Who cooperates in a group?" "Who upsets things in a group?" "Who is shy?" "Who starts fights?" and "Who is a leader?" Each question was accompanied by a brief description of the behavior. As with the friendship nomination measure,

children were allowed to make unlimited nominations for each behavioral description. Scores were computed in the same manner as the friendship nomination score.

To provide convergent behavioral information, we also obtained teacher ratings on a comparable set of behaviors to those on the peer assessment measure. Teachers rated on a seven-point scale four dimensions of children's social behavior with peers: friendly/cooperative, avoidant/withdrawn, bossy/domineering, and aggressive/disruptive. We also obtained ratings on the Teacher Report Form (TRF) of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1984) in order to determine the extent to which retarded children might display more severe maladaptive behaviors associated with childhood pschopathology.

Children's goal orientations in game situations were assessed using a self-report measure adapted from our previous research with nonretarded children (Taylor & Asher, 1985). This adapted measure consisted of 21 items designed to assess three types of goal orientation: relationship goals, performance goals, and avoidance goals or concerns. To decrease social desirability biases in children's responses, we presented the items using the "structured alternative" format developed by Susan Harter (1982) for the Perceived Competence Scale for Children. Table 1 shows the format and sample items representing each of the three goal types. Items were scored on a four-point scale, and subscale scores were computed by summing the ratings assigned to the items for each goal type.

A loneliness scale for children recently used by Asher and Wheeler (1985) was adapted for purposes of the study. This measure consists of 16 items designed to assess children's feelings of loneliness and social

dissatisfaction in school plus eight filler items focusing on hobbies and interests. All items and the item format are shown in Table 2. Children rate each item on a five-point scale from always true to not true at all. A total score was computed by summing the ratings assigned to each of the 16 primary items.

A series of multivariate and univariate analyses of variance were conducted to examine differences between the retarded and nonretarded groups with respect to each of the dependent measures. Table 3 shows the means, standard deviations and the univariate F values for each measure for the two groups. Consistent with the previous research, the retarded children were found to be significantly lower in sociometric status than the nonretarded students. In fact, the retarded group scored a full standard deviation below the nonretarded group on both sociometric measures. Thus, even when compared to a closely-matched nonretarded sample, the retarded students were found to experience considerably lower status in the mainstream class.

With respect to the peer assessment results, there were significant group differences on three of the five behavior nomination items. Retarded as compared to nonretarded students were perceived as less cooperative, more shy, and less likely to be named as leaders. Retarded and nonretarded children did not differ, however, with respect to disruptive or aggressive behavior. The peer assessment findings thus support our hypothesis that mildly retarded children are shy and withdrawn rather than aggressive-disruptive. Also consistent with our hypothesis, the retarded children are clearly lacking in positive social skills, specifically cooperation and leadership skills. It appears, then, that when a more differentiated peer

assessment measure is used, peer perceptions closely parallel the behavioral patterns directly observed in previous research.

Consistent with the peer assessment findings, regular class teachers perceived retarded students as less friendly and cooperative, and more avoidant and withdrawn than the nonretarded comparison students. No significant differences were found with respect to the teachers' perceptions of bossy/domineering behavior or aggressive/disruptive behavior. Overall, then, the teacher assessment findings are consistent with those of the peer assessment data and lend further support to hypotheses concerning the withdrawn and unskilled patterns of mildly retarded children. Also, consistent with the other behavioral findings, the TRF results indicate that the retarded children were no more likely than the nonretarded children to demonstrate maladaptive behavior patterns associated with psychopathology.

With respect to goal orientation, group differences were found for all three goal subscales. Retarded as compared to nonretarded children placed less importance on relationship goals, more importance on performance goals, and were more concerned about avoiding negative experiences in the game. This finding of a more avoidant goal orientation and a weaker emphasis on relationship goals on the part of the retarded children supports our original hypothesis. Apparently these children do not think as much about the oppotunities game situations provide for getting to know and enjoy being with other children. Instead, their focus seems to be on the performance aspects of games and potential failure and rejection.

Finally, we found significant group differences with respect to loneliness. Consistent with expectation, retarded students reported feeling more lonely and dissatisfied with their social relationships in school than did

the nonretarded students. This level of loneliness is even greater than that found for highly rejected nonretarded children in previous research (Asher & Wheeler, 1985). At the same time, we don't know the particular source and context of the retarded child's feelings of loneliness. In future research, it would be important to determine whether these feelings are exclusive to the mainstream context or also extend to peer relationships in the special education classroom. In either case, the present findings suggest the importance of including this type of self-report measure in evaluation studies of the effects of mainstreaming.

Table 4 shows the behavioral correlates of sociometric status for the retarded and nonretarded children. It can be seen that the patterns of correlation of the peer assessment and sociometric measures were quite similar for the retarded and nonretarded groups. For both groups, the strongest correlates of acceptance were "cooperates," "disrupts," and "leads." "Fights" was a weaker correlate and reached significance only for the nonretarded group. "Shy" was not significantly correlated with status for either group. The correlational pattern for the friendship nomination measure was similar, but somewhat weaker, than that found for the acceptance rating.

The correlational pattern found for the retarded sample further supports the need to assess multiple dimensions of social behavior. In this case, cooperation was a stronger correlate of status than was disruptiveness. Further, aggressive behavior was not significantly correlated with status for the retarded children. This suggests that the lack of prosocial skills is a more important determinant of the retarded child's peer status than is the presence of antisocial behavior.

As can be seen in the table 4, the teacher ratings of social behavior were, in general, not strongly related to status for either group, although the relationships were somewhat stronger for the nonretarded students. We also examined the correlates of goal orientation and loneliness. Contrary to expectations, neither goals nor loneliness were significantly correlated with peer status. This result is in contrast with previous research. The reason for this discrepancy is not clear, but earlier sstudies have used considerably larger samples (e.g., N=500). The small and more selective samples used in the present study may have served to attenuate these correlational findings.

In conclusion, the present findings suggest that a complete picture of the retarded child's social adjustment in the regular classroom requires attention to a differentiated set of behavioral characteristics of the retarded child as well as motivational and affective aspects of the retarded child's social experience. The findings that the mildly retarded children were lower in peer status, more shy and withdrawn, less socially skilled, more lonely, and more avoidant in their goals also provide further support for the idea that mainstreaming will not, by itself, promote social competence and peer acceptance of mildly retarded children. What may be needed are fairly intensive and comprehensive social intervention programs which combine environmental manipulations, such as cooperative grouping, with direct social skills training for the retarded child. It also may be important to alter the retarded child's motivational orientation, since findings from the present study suggest that many of these children have maladaptive goal orientations which emphasize avoidance or performance concerns rather than concern for building positive social relations. Indeed,

training in game-playing competencies per se may be needed to help children gain confidence in school contexts such as recess or physical education that call upon game playing skills as well as social skills.

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Table 1

Examples of the Three Types of Items from the Game-Playing Goals Questionnaire

**Relationship Item**

| Almost Always true for me | Sometimes true for me | | | | Sometimes true for me | Almost Always true for me |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | 3 | For some kids it's important to get along well with the other players | BUT | For other kids it's not important that they get along well with the other players | 2 | 1 |

**Performance Item**

| Almost Always true for me | Sometimes true for me | | | | Sometimes true for me | Almost Always true for me |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | For some kids winning the game is really important | BUT | For other kids winning is not that important | | |

**Avoidance Item**

| Almost Always true for me | Sometimes true for me | | | | Sometimes true for me | Almost Always true for me |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Some kids worry that the other players might be mean to them | BUT | Other kids do not worry about players being mean to them | | |

Table 2

Loneliness Questionnaire Items

1. It's easy for me to make new friends at school.

| Always True | True Most of time | Sometimes true | Hardly Ever true | Not True at all |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

*2. I like to read.
3. I have other kids to talk to in my classes.
4. I'm good at working with other children in my class.
*5. I watch TV a lot.
+6. It's hard for me to make friends at school.
*7. I like school.
8. I have lots of friends in my class.
+9. I feel alone at school.
10. I can find a friend in my class when I need one.
*11. I play sports a lot.
+12. It's hard to get kids in school to like me.
*13. I like science.
14. I have children to play with at school.
*15. I like music
16. I get along with my classmates.
+17. I feel left out of things at school.
18. There are other kids I can go to when I need help in school.
*19. I like to paint and draw.
20. I get along with other children in school.
+21. I'm lonely at school.
22. I am liked a lot by the kids in my class.
*23. I like playing board games a lot.
24. I have friends in my class.

*Hobby or interest item
+Items for which response order was reversed in scoring

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations on the Sociometric Status, Behavior, Goals, and Loneliness Measures for the EMR and NonEMR Groups

| | EMR | | NonEMR | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Measure | M | SD | M | SD | F |
| Sociometric Status | | | | | |
| Play Rating | -1.55 | .71 | -.32 | .72 | 46.32*** |
| Friendship Nomination | -1.30 | .51 | -.29 | .66 | 44.69*** |
| Peer Assessment | | | | | |
| Cooperates | -1.30 | .67 | -.41 | .84 | 21.12*** |
| Disrupts | .43 | .98 | .38 | 1.03 | ns |
| Shy | 1.52 | 1.35 | .06 | 1.08 | 21.98*** |
| Fights | .01 | .96 | .42 | 1.09 | ns |
| Leads | -.88 | .30 | -.37 | .66 | 16.28*** |
| Teacher Rating | | | | | |
| Friendly/Cooperative | 3.74 | 1.75 | 5.14 | 1.63 | 11.19** |
| Avoidant/Withdrawn | 3.77 | 2.17 | 2.00 | 1.35 | 15.96*** |
| Bossy/Domineering | 2.71 | 2.22 | 3.20 | 2.01 | ns |
| Aggressive/Disruptive | 2.52 | 1.88 | 2.47 | 1.76 | ns |
| TRF Total Score | 31.48 | 30.71 | 23.53 | 22.73 | ns |
| Goal Orientation | | | | | |
| Relationship | 20.47 | 3.65 | 23.15 | 3.31 | 10.04** |
| Performance | 18.76 | 4.06 | 14.76 | 4.70 | 11.36** |
| Avoidance | 16.18 | 3.91 | 14.29 | 3.49 | 4.39* |
| Loneliness | 40.09 | 8.20 | 28.74 | 9.26 | 28.66*** |

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

Table 4

Correlations of Behavior with Sociometric Status Measures for EMR and NonEMR Groups

| | EMR | | NonEMR | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Measure | Play | Friend | Play | Friend |
| Peer Assessment | | | | |
| Cooperates | .76*** | .65*** | .59*** | .35 |
| Disrupts | -.57*** | -.35 | -.59*** | -.32 |
| Shy | .11 | -.10 | .18 | .07 |
| Fights | -.35 | -.11 | -.44* | -.13 |
| Leads | .57*** | .42* | .50** | .49** |
| Teacher Rating | | | | |
| Friendly/Cooperative | .02 | .12 | .53** | .38* |
| Avoidant/Withdrawn | -.18 | -.37* | -.32 | -.25 |
| Bossy/Domineering | -.15 | -.14 | .02 | .21 |
| Aggressive/Disruptive | -.17 | -.11 | -.26 | .04 |
| TRF Total Score | -.26 | -.31 | -.15 | .09 |

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.